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# **Reflective learning: adding value to the Openings experience?**

Dissertation for the Master of Research (MRes) degree  
The Open University

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# Reflective learning: adding value to the Openings experience?

## Abstract

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Thinkers have long sought to illuminate the ways in which the practical is linked to the theoretical. There are many instances of where these ideas have involved the activity of *reflection* in transforming experience into knowledge (Habermas, 1974; Van Manen, 1977; Kolb, 1984). More recently, models of reflective learning have proposed that critical reflection is a requisite for 'transformational endeavours' such as higher learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, p. 53).

Work done by the Centre for Widening Participation (CWP) at the Open University offered an opportunity to study reflective learning in higher education. As a point of entry for Open University study and as a bridge into higher education for students with low educational qualifications, the Openings programme within CWP may be the first experience some learners have had with reflective learning at this level. This dissertation employs a qualitative approach as it tries to illuminate this phenomenon by looking at the extent to which Openings students feel the reflective tasks have added value to their learning experience.

Data were collected from twelve recent Openings students through the use of telephone interviews. Participants' responses were analysed across four sub-questions that dealt with: 1) understanding reflective learning 2) orientating to reflective learning 3) valuing reflective writing and 4) perceiving the role of the tutor in promoting reflective learning.

Findings suggested that some Openings students find reflective tasks challenging when they are presented as self-assessment exercises. Some learners rank reflective tasks as a lower priority because they are presented as separate to the content-based tasks and because some of the reflective work is not assessed. Some respondents perceive reflective tasks as pointless activities because it keeps them from the actual coursework. Finally, Openings students seem to be dependent on written feedback from the tutor in order to fully engage in the reflective learning activities.

**Keywords:** reflection, reflective learning, experiential learning, Openings, widening participation

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## A note on the text

There is a great deal of academic literature on the subject of reflective learning and some of this writing has contributed to this dissertation. In a very few cases some of the more obscure sources have been referenced through a secondary source in this text because the University Library was unable to obtain them by the deadline for submission. In principle these sources are available and would have been accessed given more time.

## **Chapter 1: Aims and objectives**

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Pedagogical notions regarding the use of reflection in learning have developed over the past century as researchers and practitioners have sought to understand and enhance the learning experience. Writing on this subject can be traced to Dewey's (1910, p. 135) discussion of how teaching involves moving learners 'from the concrete to the abstract'. In the past four decades, several thinkers have also sought to illuminate the ways in which the practical is linked to the theoretical. There are many instances of where these ideas involve the activity of reflection in learning. Habermas (1974) suggested that it was 'self-reflection' that 'leads to insight' when applying theory to practice (p. 23). Van Manen (1977) outlined 'levels of reflectivity' in ways learners work to understand theory in practice (p. 226). More recently, models of reflective learning propose that critical reflection is a requisite for 'transformational endeavours' such as higher learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, p. 53).

Work done by the Centre for Widening Participation (CWP) at the Open University offered an opportunity to study the role of reflective learning in higher education. As a point of entry for Open University study and as a bridge into higher education for students with low educational qualifications, the Openings programme within CWP may be the first experience some learners have had with reflective learning at this level. This dissertation attempts to illuminate this phenomenon by looking at Openings students' perceptions of the reflective components of the course model. This first chapter will provide a background of the Openings programme, will look at the aims and objectives of the project and will explain the rationale for choosing this particular study.

### **Background**

The CWP aims to make higher education accessible to all groups of society, including those who are traditionally under-represented in higher learning and those who have limited access 'for whatever reason' (CWP, 2007, p. 1). One



strategy is the Openings programme, which offers a series of introductory short courses designed to prepare learners for further university study by developing their study skills, introducing them to distance learning, building their confidence and providing a flavour of a particular subject area (Spoors, 2008).

At the time of writing, CWP offers ten Openings courses in a variety of subject areas. As these are distance learning courses, most students receive support through telephone tutorials and postal correspondence. Online communication is the medium for a few of the Openings courses but is still not compulsory for most of them. Each of these courses includes two tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) and one end of course assessment (ECA). All three of these assessments include a short reflective task that is marked against a particular learning outcome.

Learning Outcome 8: You have thought about your own learning. (CWP, 2008)

Additionally, the course model includes non-compulsory reflective tasks such as *The Learning Plan* and *The Learning Review*, which are not marked by the tutor, but which students are prompted to complete in the course materials.

### **Aims and objectives**

The aim of this dissertation is to gain insight into the extent to which learners perceive reflective activities to add value to the Openings course. This particular line of inquiry raises a host of questions relating to learners' perceptions of reflection in general terms as well as their perceptions of reflection relating specifically to the Openings course. There are also many areas to explore when attempting to answer the wider question of added value. However, two of these areas provide channels to follow in order to refine a set of research questions for this project.

#### *i. How learners understand the role of reflective learning activities*

This question is twofold in nature because it raises the question of how learners define *reflection* generally and how they relate that to reflection in practice. Whether or not a learner relates to a simplistic meaning or has been exposed to a more complex meaning, perhaps through work or study, may help to address the question of the value that is given to the activity of reflection. Also there is the more specific question of the extent to which learners are aware of the reflective activities in the course model, and the purposes they serve.

*ii. How reflective learning is operationalised in the course*

This question explores the extent to which learners feel reflection is facilitated through the coursework and interaction with the tutor and whether or not these parts of the experience add value to their learning. Understanding the way in which reflective learning happens on the course and what the students think about it is relevant to the central research question.

**Rationale for research**

The question of value is fitting to pose in light of the stakeholders involved in the enterprise of widening participation and in particular the Open University's initiative of the Openings programme. Although this particular project will be limited to the perceptions of Openings students in the Open University, its findings may be applicable to a wider audience since the concept of reflective learning and that of widening participation are familiar in multiple contexts.

The qualitative design of this research captures individual ideas from learners on the Openings programme. Such a collection of voices may contribute to existing pedagogical research, where an absence of stories from the learner's perspective has been noted (Clare, 2002). However, the primary *raison d'être* for evaluating the value of reflective learning in higher learning is to enhance the current knowledge of reflective learning in practice. This rationale is endorsed by British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2004) as being at the heart of educational research.

To improve educational policy and practice, by informing pedagogic, curricular and other educational judgements and decisions. (p. 2)

Research findings from this project may provide a resource for CWP in terms of developing the Openings curriculum and may even provide reference material for use in supporting other central academic units. Investigating the perceptions of Openings students will mean that additional research will exist that accesses the widening participation cohort in an attempt to better understand their needs. CWP's (2007) strategic functions such as creating 'market responsiveness and innovative offerings' and of 'promoting widening participation and fair access', seem to champion research of this nature at an institutional level (pp. 2-3).

This chapter presented the central research aim of the project, discussed the key questions it raised and provided a rationale for choosing this study. The next chapter attempts to locate these ideas within contemporary academic literature in an effort to contextualise and refine a set of research questions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

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This chapter attempts to address the question of the value of reflective learning in the Openings programme by locating relevant themes within contemporary academic writing. The literature review will be presented in two parts, which correspond to the two areas that were outlined in the previous chapter: *how learners understand the role of reflective learning activities* and *how reflective learning is operationalised in the course*.

### **How learners understand the role of reflective learning activities**

One starting point for understanding reflective learning would be to understand the concept of experiential learning that underpins some of the conceptual frameworks in this field. A working definition of learning was proposed by Kolb (1984, p. 38) that attributes the activity of learning to a 'transformation of experience'. Indeed, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle provides a model of this transformation process that shows the continuous loop from the 'concrete experience' to the process of 'reflective observation' to 'abstract conceptualisation' to 'active experimentation' (p. 42). In this way, reflecting on the experience leads the learner to theorise on this new knowledge. The transformation of experience to knowledge occurs as the theories are applied in real life situations, where additional concrete experience is acquired and the loop continues.

Brookfield (1987, pp. 26-28) presented a model for 'critical thinking' that is somewhat similar to Kolb's cycle. Here the thinker experiences a 'trigger event' that leads to 'appraisal', 'exploration', 'developing alternative perspectives' and 'integration'. In these examples, Kolb's stage of 'reflection' would involve a similar process to Brookfield's idea of 'appraisal' and would be crucial steps to take in the conversion of experience to knowledge. However, accomplishing this loop of learning through experience is not necessarily unproblematic. Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993, p. 1) described the process as a 'struggle'.

Although we spend most of our time learning from experience, this aspect of learning is greatly neglected in comparison with that which takes place in the formal classroom. (p. 1)

Kolb's cycle has been criticised by some who claim that while it is a useful tool for 'day to day learning' it is restricted to a single-loop model of learning that does not take into account emerging information and new ways of understanding phenomena (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, p. 44). Pedlar et al. (2001) proposed a model of reflective learning that claimed to bypass the single-loop model by accounting for human emotion. Rather than reflecting on a discrete event, this model involves three elements: 'feelings', 'thoughts and ideas' and 'action-tendencies' (in Ramsey, 2006, pp. 22-25). Previous works such as Brookfield's (1987) model also suggested there is evidence that human emotion can initiate double-loop learning by referring to life incidents as 'trigger events' that stimulate critical thinking.

Although it does account for the effect of emotion in learning, Ramsey (2006) argued that Pedlar et al.'s learning model focuses on individual behaviour and fails to account for the effect of relationships on learning. Brockbank and McGill (1998, p. 46) claimed that the idea of 'relationship' is crucial to learning and that this is accomplished through reflective dialogue between a teacher and a learner. This dialogical model of reflective learning focuses on the role of the teacher as a 'facilitator' and recognises the way in which the teacher engages in reflective practice while fostering a reflective learning environment for the pupil.

A pertinent point to raise may be that some of the models discussed in this section are used to introduce the concept of reflective learning in other Open University courses. For example, course *BU130: Working and Learning* uses Ramsey's (2006) guide to help students understand Kolb's and Pedlar et al.'s models. *The Manager's Good Study Guide*, which is used as a text and as a reference tool for the Open University Business School also covers Kolb's ideas,

among others (Tyler, 2007). Since these ideas are not explained in the Openings course material, it may be relevant to explore the extent to which learners on the Openings programme feel they understand the concept and theoretical frameworks of reflective learning.

Whether or not a learner relates to a simplistic meaning of reflection or has been exposed to a more complex view of the concept, perhaps through work or study, may help to address the question of the value that is given to the activity of reflection. For example, an Openings student with very little comprehension of reflective learning may not view these activities as adding value because they are unable to recognise the role they play in their own learning. At the extreme, students entering the Openings programme with a developed sense of reflective learning may find the reflective tasks too basic as they are designed to introduce students to this concept.

Furthermore, learners' expectations of the course will be different depending on how they relate to the concept of reflective learning. For instance, a learner who relates to a relationship model of learning may hold a different set of expectations of the course tutor than a learner who relates primarily to Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Therefore, and in light of the literature on reflective learning reviewed in this chapter, a relevant research question would ask:

*Sub-question 1: To what extent do Openings students feel they understand the concept of reflective learning?*

Another way to look at the question of how learners understand the role of reflective learning activities is to ask *how equipped Openings students are to orientate to reflective activity*. While not directly related to learning, Wellington and Austin (1996, pp. 309-312) expanded Grimmett et al.'s (1990) work to include five orientations to reflective practice. Here they referred to learners as 'practitioners' (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of five orientations to reflective practice

Orientation	Practitioner characteristics
The immediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on 'pleasant survival'</li> <li>• Looks mainly at 'the task at hand'</li> <li>• Makes records that are 'essentially non-reflective'</li> </ul>
The technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on the 'development and perfection' of teaching methods</li> <li>• Looks at ways to diagnose and meet outcomes in an efficient and/or effective way</li> </ul>
The deliberative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks personal meaning from engaging with the learning context</li> <li>• Looks to negotiate new boundaries in order to explore outside the present setting</li> <li>• Reflects on ways to improve communication and to consider feelings and attitudes in the process</li> </ul>
The dialectic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Champions 'political liberation' through 'awareness' and 'activism'.</li> <li>• Questions institutional boundaries and seeks to foster change toward 'democratic principles'</li> </ul>
The transpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on 'universal personal liberation'</li> <li>• Reflects on ways of personal and/or spiritual growth</li> </ul>

(adapted from Wellington and Austin, 1996, pp. 309-311)

This framework provides a clear description of five ways that practitioners orientate to reflective work. Wellington and Austin also included a flowchart with their research that categorised practitioners as fitting a particular orientation. However, there are also some disadvantages to the model. For example, in this particular study the authors relied on self-reported data despite acknowledging that:

for many practitioners reflection is tacit; they do not realise that they engage in reflective practice until they encounter it in their reading, in their interaction with colleagues or as part of their professional training.

(Wellington and Austin, 1996, p. 313)

This reliance on self-reported, rather than observed, data may produce an underestimation of the level of reflective work that does occur 'tacitly'.

Furthermore, the model does not provide space for practitioners to develop their reflective orientations, which is inconsistent with the theory that reflective practice can be learned (Schön, 1983). Hughes and Lucas (2008) also referred to

Wellington and Austin's model in their discussion of reflective frameworks for higher learning. However, the data collected in their study supported the 'view that the teaching of reflection can initiate and support a change in the orientation of the learner towards reflection' (p. 3).

Germane to the question of how well Openings students understand the concept of reflective learning is the question of how equipped Openings students are to engage in reflective activity. If, for example, Wellington and Austin's model were to be used to understand the reflective orientations of Openings students, it would need to account for where students are at in their own learning. Davys and Beddoe (2009, p. 2) suggested that reflection is 'not necessarily an easy option for the very new practitioner'. This claim is supported by Butler's (1996) five stages of competence development. The first two stages of this model described learners as being a 'novice' and an 'advanced beginner', respectively (pp. 277-280; see Table 2). In terms of higher learning, Openings students may be more likely to fall into one of these two categories since the courses are designed to provide a bridge to university study for learners with low previous education qualifications. In this model, Butler referred to learners as 'practitioners'.

Table 2: First two stages of Butler's five stages of competence development

Stage	Practitioner characteristics
1. Novice	They are 'new to the work' and the student needs a lot of guidance. The work needs to be 'rule governed'. Actions of novices are predictable in that they are 'extremely limited and very inflexible'.
2. Advanced beginner	Learners will be able to determine the key points but will look to others for answers and see these as being 'either right or wrong'. An advanced beginner will most probably develop a dependence on the teacher.

(adapted from Butler, 1996, pp. 277-278)

Reflection occurs as learners move through the higher stages of competence, which Butler referred to as being 'competent', 'proficient' and 'expert'. A model such as Butler's may be useful to consider when assessing the extent to which



students are equipped to engage in reflective learning. With these ideas in mind, it would be relevant to ask the following question in this research:

*Sub-question 2: How do Openings students orientate to reflective learning?*

### **How reflective learning is operationalised in the course**

Reflective learning strategies, such as *reflective writing* and *facilitative supervision* are themes in current academic writing and are relevant to this research question.

#### *i. Reflective writing*

Reflective writing strategies can take several forms but are commonly implemented as reflective learning journals or as reflective essays. The point of including these strategies within the course design is to encourage reflective practice, 'as leaving the process of reflection for students to do themselves may result in reflection not taking place' (Fleming and Martin, 2007, p. 116).

The reflective journaling technique is sometimes referred to as a 'journal' or a 'learning log'. Ramsey (2006) differentiated between the two by suggesting that a reflective journal is a place where writing occurs regularly to record the process of inquiry, whereas a log may only include a record of 'reflections on a critical incident' (p. 31). Others have expanded their understanding of the reflective journal to include personal feelings and evaluation (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). A study by Fleming and Martin (2007) found that students, while initially confused as to the point of keeping a reflective journal, reported that the exercise became valuable to their learning over time. This finding supports a separate notion that although a journal may begin with a superficial 'catalogue of events', over time and with some input from the tutor, the reflective writing can become introspective and meaningful (Van Gyn, 1996, p. 119).

Another strategy for operationalising reflective learning is through a reflective essay. Fleming and Martin (2007, p. 117) suggested that this strategy is one 'which allows the student to summarise their progress in terms of achieving their learning outcomes and comment on critical incidents'. One outcome of their study indicated that some students found the written assessment to be beneficial in making sense of critical reflection, despite not feeling confident in their ability to keep a reflective learning journal.

Clare (2007) discussed written assessments as part of the reflective learning strategy for social work students. In her study, students were given clear guidelines on how to analyse their own learning, which provided a structure for students to start making sense of how reflection worked in their own lives. The results of this study were quite encouraging, showing that all learners demonstrated an ability to move between theory and practice as well as to develop 'personalised frameworks for practice' (p. 437).

The juxtaposition of these two studies offers some interesting parallels. For instance, both studies focused only on journaling and essay writing as reflective writing strategies. However, Connelly and Clandinin (1990, pp. 2-6) claimed that 'humans are storytelling organisms' and therefore reflective writing can take many different forms such as 'field notes of shared experience', 'journal records', 'interviews', 'story telling' and 'letter writing'. This point is relevant to consider when applying the findings of the aforementioned studies to how reflective writing is used in the Openings courses, since journaling and essay writing are not the only strategies that exist.

Furthermore, these two studies raise a contrasting point in terms of methodology. Fleming and Martin's work used self-reporting methods to learn how students felt about the journaling and essay writing tasks while Clare's study seemed to rely primarily on observed data. An instance of 'reactivity', in this case trying to please the interviewer, could offer one possible explanation as to the universally positive

feedback from Fleming and Martin's sample as opposed to the more varied input from Clare's group (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 177). In relation to collecting data for this research, Fleming and Martin's study provides a possible example of how the effect of the researcher could distort the informants' responses.

Finally, there appears to be a discrepancy between these studies in the way they addressed the structuring of written assessments. The guidelines for writing the reflective essay in Clare's study appeared to be useful to the students. However, Fleming and Martin's (2007) view suggested that an element of structure within the assessment may undermine the intention of the task.

Personal learning can be unforeseen and unpredictable and is maximised through reflection on experiences. Therefore, it is important that there is flexibility in the nature and structure of the assessment of the individual learning outcomes...so that the learning derived from the experience is not constrained. (p. 117)

## *ii. Facilitative supervision*

Dialogue between the learner and the teacher has already been noted in this review as a crucial component to the reflective meaning making that occurs in a *relationship* learning model (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). Atherton (2004) supported this notion by suggesting that facilitative supervision will encourage reflective learning to a greater extent than didactic teaching since there is more space for a dialogue to develop between the learner and the supervisor.

Davys and Beddoe (2009) presented a case study that showed how a 4-stage reflective learning model worked in a relationship between a student and her supervisor.

The Reflective Learning Model describes four stages *event*, *exploration*, *experimentation* and *evaluation* which are addressed sequentially but

allow for the student and the supervisor to move back and forth between the various stages if necessary. (p. 6)

A finding of this study emphasised the importance of striking a balance between didactic instruction and facilitated learning through reflection. Finding this balance may be relevant to Openings tutors in reinforcing reflective learning. In the case of this dissertation, the learners' perspective is sought as to how well this is achieved.

A study by Lizzio et al. (2005) used a quantitative method to measure the perceptions of psychology students as to the effectiveness of supervision. Two findings from this study are relevant to this research in terms of promoting reflective learning through facilitative supervision. First, statistical analysis showed that a 'facilitative, but not a didactic, supervisory approach positively influences supervisees' perceptions of the overall effectiveness of supervision'. Second, it was shown that facilitative supervisors 'made flexible use of both didactic and facilitative techniques' (p. 253).

Openings students rely, to some extent, on the guidance of the course tutor in understanding the course content. The literature reviewed here suggests that an effective supervisory relationship is necessary to the learning experience and that this supervision needs to offer a balanced combination of didactic instruction and facilitated learning through reflection. Tutors who can offer a range of didactic and facilitative techniques in the correct proportions may foster more effective learning situations.

However, if thinking of Openings students as matching the previously mentioned stages of 'novice' and 'advanced beginner' (Butler, 1996, pp. 277-278), it may be relevant to consider the extent to which the learner depends on the tutor for their own learning. Butler suggested that students at these stages will look to their teachers for answers. Lizzio et al. (2005, p. 251) assuaged the negative implications of dependence by suggesting that it may have more to do with

‘feelings and trust and safety’. Furthermore, the opposite end of the spectrum, *independence*, is noted as something to work toward in the context of higher learning (Knight, 1996).

Independence comes from mastery. And mastery may need to be purposefully promoted through an enabling structure. (p. 35)

In light of the literature reviewed here, two additional research questions could be relevant to pose to gain a better understanding of the way in which reflective learning happens on this course and what students think of it.

*Sub-question 3: To what extent do Openings students feel the reflective writing tasks add value to the course?*

*Sub-question 4: How do Openings students feel the course tutor promotes reflective learning on the course?*

### **Revisiting the central research question**

In refining the original research objectives and by locating them within recent academic literature on reflective learning, a new set of questions has emerged. Each of these new questions is nested in a central purpose of considering the value of reflection in the Openings course model. So, in looking at learners’ perceptions of these issues, a global picture of added value can emerge: (1) the extent to which Openings students feel they understand the concept of reflective learning; (2) how Openings students orientate to reflective learning; (3) the extent to which Openings students feel the reflective writing tasks add value to the course; and (4) how Openings students feel the course tutor promotes reflective learning on the course.

## Chapter 3: Methods of data collection

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This chapter explains the rationale for choosing this particular approach to research based on the nature of the data and the flexibility in analysing the data. Methods of data collection will also be considered, and a rationale provided for the chosen methodology. Additionally, the sampling process will be explained and ethical considerations associated with this particular project will be discussed.

### Research approach

#### *Nature of the data*

The focus on learners' *perceptions* seemed to oblige a qualitative approach; the research questions were not set up in a way that made the responses easily measured. Furthermore, a qualitative approach would be more suited to represent the individual voice of the learner, thereby personalising the data and helping maintain the commitment to diversity that is the bedrock of the Openings programme.

Even so, proponents of 'epistemological scepticism' could argue that a personal account can never provide a true reflection of reality because the account is being provided through the experience and social tools of one speaker, which in turn is being processed with the experience and social tools of the listener (Hammersley and Gomm, 2006, p. 9). The dilemma that exists then is one of 'representation and legitimation' (Taylor, 2008, p. 12). The fact that language is 'constitutive' in that it builds a social reality, and 'situated' in that it is specific to a particular version of reality, means that the accounts provided by the participants would only be relevant to the meaning that is created within a particular version of reality.

However, this point on epistemological scepticism suggests that meaning is constructed as a joint effort between the informant and the interviewer. In doing

so, speakers will use a shared framework to adjust to the interaction during the process of meaning-making (Taylor, 2008). Therefore, it does seem plausible that at least part of the account could be considered valid if framed by its commonly understood context.

### *Flexibility in analysing the data*

In terms of data analysis, a qualitative approach would provide analytical space should relatively unexpected themes emerge from the data. Also, a qualitative approach would accommodate inferential theoretical analysis such as the constant comparative method, should it be relevant to impose a particular theory or framework on the data. A hypothesis-led project, which would be commonly associated with a quantitative approach to research, may not offer the same degree of flexibility in the way data can be analysed. In other words, rather than trying to test pre-defined hypotheses or to focus closely on outcomes, as is the case with quantitative research, a qualitative approach to data collection, and consequently data analysis, promotes the deeper exploration of the educational phenomena (Atkinson et al., 1988).

Critics of qualitative approaches to research may question the strength of the research in terms of validity since a collection of accounts, such as those presented in this research, are not regulated with the same scientific rigour as a quantitative approach would warrant. This viewpoint, referred to as 'methodological caution' suggests that interview data is not an adequate replacement for observed data (Hammersley and Gomm, 2006, p. 9).

However, Denzin (1997) suggested that 'polyvocality', the concept of introducing multiple voices, can be used to strengthen the authority of the text (in Taylor and Smith, 2008, p. 98). Additionally, the fact that the research questions are not approached in a way that necessarily views objectivity as an ideal could be a favourable feature when looking at learners' perceptions. Stenhouse (1975), when discussing a qualitative approach to action research concurred.

Accordingly we are concerned with the development of a sensitive and self-critical subjective perspective and not with an aspiration towards an unattainable objectivity. (p. 157)

Although quantitative studies of learners' perceptions do exist, such as Lizzio et al. (2005), a qualitative approach seemed more suitable for this particular project.

### **Methods of data collection**

Qualitative methods, such as participation observation, focus groups and interviews were considered for this project. Participant observation was not a strong contender as a method of data collection for two main reasons. Firstly, the participants' behaviour is not an object of inquiry. Rather this research aims to collect and analyse the participants' perceptions, which would be typically conveyed through written and verbal speech rather than action or interaction with others. Secondly, the Openings programme is a distance learning course, usually without a physical or even virtual learning environment, which means the participants have studied in isolation from other learners on the course and in a variety of life contexts. Therefore, there would be no obvious way to observe these learners, independently or in a group.

Focus groups were given more serious consideration but were also rejected as a means of data collection for two reasons. First, the focus group, although noted by Fontana and Frey (2005) as a potential source of rich data, promotes a format that may mute some of the voices that this research aims to capture.

The emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression (a group can be dominated by one person), and 'groupthink' is a possible outcome. (p. 705)

Secondly, limitations on time and money did not promote the focus group method of data collection. There was no clear incentive for participants to travel to a common meeting place for the purpose of a group meeting. Furthermore, finding



a suitable date and time for a gathering could be a potentially delicate undertaking, which might have excluded some participants if they were unable to attend a particular session. That said, a focus group method would be a consideration when extending this line of inquiry and may be appropriate for collecting input from other stakeholders in the widening participation endeavour. Course tutors, for example, may be more easily assembled and may be motivated by the professional development that can occur in sharing ideas with other practitioners.

Interviews, as the primary form of data collection, were considered with the most weight, as this method seemed to be designed to capture the learners' perceptions in a way that helped to address the research question. There were also practical characteristics of the interview method that appealed to this particular research project. For example, collecting data from individuals rather than from a group, as would be the case in a focus group format, meant that the number of participants could be maximised since interviews could be scheduled to fit around their personal lives. Also, an individual interaction may provide closure for the learner in terms of creating an anonymous space to air personal experiences and opinions of their learning experience on the Openings course.

Deciding how to conduct these interviews involved several other practical considerations, namely time and money. Face-to-face interviews carried similar concerns as the focus group in terms of coordinating the meetings and assessing the risks involved with various venues and travel. The cost of travel was also a consideration, whether incurred by the interviewer or as a reimbursement of expenses to the interviewee.

Email interviewing could have been employed to collect data without these constraints. In fact, one email interview technique, called the 'pen-pal method', was considered due to its advantage of building a rapport with the participant through an ongoing email dialogue. This method was appealing in that it was

relatively unobtrusive into the learners' time, and worked to build a cumulative picture of the learners' experience (JISC, 2009). However, the fact that most Openings students (at the time of writing) are not required to use a computer or the internet, meant that this way of interviewing would contradict the nature of this learning design and may exclude a certain group of members of the representative sample because they do not have access to the internet.

### **The chosen method**

Telephone interviewing was chosen as the method of data collection for this research based on its strengths in accessing perspectives of Openings students. Shuy (2001, p 539) identified several factors for deciding between telephone and face-to-face interviews. One of these dealt with 'the complexity of the issues and questions'. Although Shuy claimed that face-to-face interviews are usually better suited for dealing with 'complex issues' (p. 552), typically speaking, Openings students communicate with their tutors over the telephone. Therefore, participants were already accustomed to discussing potentially complex issues, such as course concepts, over the telephone. This meant that a reasonable discussion could take place for the purposes of this research as well, and that it would be realistic to assume that participants would have access to a telephone.

The use of telephone interviews rather than face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher to circumvent the resource constraints of time and money by offering a convenient, inexpensive alternative (Shuy, 2001). Finally telephone interviewing would be able to include participants that do not have access to the internet, which would be required for an email interviewing method.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) included a list of interview questions used to guide the conversation. The interview was not piloted because of the risk of losing potentially rich data from a small group of participants. Rather, all data collected from the interviews were used in the analysis. In order to hedge against the risks associated with an unpiloted interview protocol, all members of the

sample received a list of interview questions at the initial point of contact. Having these questions in advance may have helped the participants prepare questions beforehand. Attention to these questions may have also helped to iron out any problems in how the questions were worded or ordered since participants would have had time to consider the root of the inquiry.

### *The sampling process*

A successful application to the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) (Appendix E) and to the University's Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC) (Appendix F) provided limited access to a sample of Openings students from the November 2008 presentation of the course. The sample was spread across the three most popular Openings courses over the last four presentations: Y156 *Understanding Children*, Y162 *Starting with Maths* and Y163 *Starting with Psychology* with the original intention of accessing a total of 75 students. However, due to a low response rate from the original group, another 75 students were accessed, giving a total sample size of 150 students.

The Centre for Widening Participation (CWP) in the Open University, which runs the Openings programme, was included in this process as well. A research proposal was offered to CWP for review and input. CWP was also made aware of SRPP and HPMEC approval. SRPP suggested that the introduction letters be sent out on CWP letterhead and from a member of the Openings course team. The rationale behind this was that Openings students would be more likely to recognise a member of the course team than they would a research student. The CWP letterhead was used to add credibility to the project and two course chairs, Alice Peasgood and Jonathan Hughes, agreed to sign the introduction letters (Appendix A: Introduction letters).

As a fellow Open University student, the researcher was not allowed access to other students' personal details. For this reason, information about these samples of students was secured in a password protected file by the research

supervisor until informed consent was obtained. This was accomplished with assistance by the departmental secretary to the Student Learning and Academic Practice Group (SLAP) within the Open University who sent out the introduction letters and consent forms (Appendix B: Student consent form). Only once the consent form was received was the researcher able to access the information from the sample and to contact consenting members of the sample by telephone to arrange a date and time for the interview.

### *Ethical considerations*

The framework for ethical research provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2004) was used to guide the ethical considerations of this dissertation. Ethical responsibilities to the research participants, the research sponsors and the research community, as outlined by BERA are discussed below. Furthermore, considerations for the health and safety of the researcher were made, especially in terms of how best to conduct the interviews. Telephone interviewing negated any potential harm that might be associated with travelling to meet participants in various locations.

#### *i. responsibility to the research participants*

Previous Openings students were approached to be active participants in a process of inquiry without regard to social or personal differences such as race, gender, age, sex or religion and without the intention of providing an advantage for one group of participants over another. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw up to the point at which data were aggregated for analysis. However, this issue was not raised at any point during the data collection and analysis stages.

The consent form (Appendix B) outlined measures to ensure that data would be stored in a secure location and would be treated with care. Personal information was not released to other parties and participants remained anonymous in the written report. These assurances were also made explicit in the consent form. A

separate application to the University's Data Protection Liaison Officer (Appendix G) was approved which outlined these aforementioned measures. Furthermore, any member of the sample that needed to discuss the implications of participating in this study could have contacted Professor John Richardson. His contact details were given as a third party to this research project on the bottom of the consent form. As far as he could tell no one tried to contact him.

*ii. Responsibility to the research sponsor*

The Open University was made aware of the proposed research through its ethics approval system as previously explained in this chapter. Furthermore, this research was carried out with guidance from research supervisors, with training from the Master of Research module tutors and with guidelines for research such as BERA's (2003) 'Good practice in educational research writing' in an effort to communicate its findings in a clear manner.

*iii. Responsibility to the research community*

This dissertation is open to the scrutiny of academics, fellow students and examiners on the Master of Research degree programme. In this way, the quality of the evidence, as well as the reliability, validity and generalisability of the findings can be assessed within the research community. This process of assessment is perhaps one way that the 'integrity and reputation' of research in this discipline can be upheld (BERA, p. 12) and that through the welcoming of constructive criticism, a spirit of continuing improvement be fostered.

## Chapter 4: Collecting and analysing the data

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### Collecting the data

Seven signed consent forms were received from the original sample of 75 Openings students. However, the initial aim of the project was to collect data from 15 interviews. Therefore, permission to approach a second sample of 75 Openings students from the same presentation and fitting the same description as the first group was requested of and granted by the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP). The second round of postal contact resulted in the receipt of five additional signed consent forms, giving a total of twelve consenting participants.

Consenting individuals were then contacted by telephone to arrange appointments for interviews to take place. There were twelve interviews in total, ranging from 5 minutes to 22 minutes in length, with a modal length of approximately 13 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a telephone recording device that fed into a digital voice recorder. The audio recordings were transcribed for the purposes of data analysis and the audio files were destroyed once the transcription was complete. Appendix D is an example of how the interviews were transcribed.

### *Profile of participants*

Initially the intention was to use a sample that was spread evenly across the three courses. However, the sample that was received from SRPP did not reflect this even distribution. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of participants by each course as compared with how the entire sample was distributed across the three courses.

Table 3: Frequency distributions of participants by course compared to sample by course

Course	Sample	Interviewed
Y156 Understanding Children	38	4 (10.5%)
Y162 Starting with Maths	40	2 (5.0%)
Y163 Starting with Psychology	72	6 (8.3%)
Total	150	12 (8.0%)

The gender, age and previous educational qualifications of the 12 participants are shown in Table 4. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Table 4: Participants' demographic information including Openings course taken

Participant	Gender	Age	Course	Previous Education
Elaine	Female	26	Y163	5 or more GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
Doris	Female	46	Y156	Undisclosed
Joanne	Female	41	Y156	1-4 GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
Dorothy	Female	41	Y156	Postgraduate degree
Ross	Male	35	Y162	1 A-Level <sup>3</sup>
Mary	Female	33	Y163	1-4 GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
John	Male	57	Y162	No formal qualifications
Ingrid	Female	73	Y163	2 or more A-Levels <sup>3</sup>
Soraya	Female	29	Y163	Below GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
Ruth	Female	34	Y156	5 or more GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
Esther	Female	59	Y163	5 or more GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>
Hannah	Female	37	Y163	Higher National Certificate

<sup>1</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education

<sup>2</sup> Ordinary Level (replaced by GCSEs in 1988)

<sup>3</sup> Advanced Level

Of those interviewed, 83.3 per cent were female and 16.7 per cent were male. Women represented 79.7 per cent of the rest of sample and men made up the remaining 20.3 per cent of the rest of the sample. Based on these descriptive statistics, the genders of the participating group seem to be fairly representative of the rest of the sample. To test this idea further, an SPSS test for the chi-squared statistic was calculated at: ( $\chi^2 = 0.09$ ; d.f. = 1;  $p = 0.76$ ). At one degree of freedom, a chi-squared value of 3.84 or higher is required for significance at the 0.05 level. This chi-squared value of 0.09 is not large enough to reject the null hypothesis of there being no significant difference between the proportion of males to females in the participating group as compared to the rest of the sample. For this reason, it could be inferred that the group that was interviewed was representative of the entire sample in terms of gender.

The mean age of participants was 43 years old, with a standard deviation of 13.93. The mean age for the rest of the sample was 39 years old with a standard deviation of 11.99. At a glance these descriptive statistics appear to indicate that the 12 interviewees were fairly representative of the rest of the sample in terms of age. A one-way ANOVA F-test was calculated to analyse the variance of the mean age of the interviewed group and of the rest of the sample. This test offered the following result: ( $F = 1.04$ ; d.f. = 1, 148;  $p = 0.31$ ). At 1 and 148 degrees of freedom, an  $F$  value of 3.91 or higher is required for significance at the 0.05 level. Here again the statistic is not large enough to reject the null hypothesis of there being no significant difference between the group of interviewees and the rest of the sample in terms of age. Therefore, it could be inferred that the ages of the participating group are representative of the entire sample.

The educational background of the participants varied considerably. The distribution of self-reported educational achievement prior to enrolling on the most recent Openings course is shown in Table 5 for both the participant group and the rest of the sample.

Table 5: Frequency distribution of participants' previous educational qualifications compared to the rest of the sample

Previous Qualifications	Frequency (Percent) of participants	Frequency (Percent) of sample
No information	1 (8.4%)	13 (9.4%)
No formal qualifications	1 (8.3%)	7 (5.1%)
Below GCSE <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>	1 (8.3%)	10 (7.2%)
1-4 GCSEs <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>	2 (16.7%)	17 (12.3%)
5 or more GCSEs <sup>1</sup> or O-Levels <sup>2</sup>	3 (25%)	22 (15.9%)
1 A-Level <sup>3</sup>	1 (8.3%)	14 (10.1%)
2 or more A-Levels <sup>3</sup>	1 (8.3%)	19 (13.8%)
Higher National Certificate	1 (8.3%)	4 (2.9%)
Higher National Diploma	0	11 (8%)
First degree	0	12 (8.7%)
Postgraduate degree	1 (8.3%)	2 (1.4%)
Total	12	138

<sup>1</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education

<sup>2</sup> Ordinary Level (replaced by GCSEs in 1988)

<sup>3</sup> Advanced Level



A chi-squared test offered a result of ( $\chi^2 = 7.44$ ; d.f. = 11;  $p = 0.76$ ). At 11 degrees of freedom, a chi-squared value of at least 19.68 would be required for significance at the 0.05 level. Therefore, this chi-squared value of 7.44 is not large enough to reject the null hypothesis of there being no significant relationship between the educational backgrounds of the participants and the educational backgrounds of the rest of the sample. For this reason, it is reasonable to infer that the group of participants are representative of the entire sample in terms of previous educational qualifications held.

Three of the participants had been enrolled in an Openings course previously, which represents 25 per cent of this group. This statistic is slightly lower for the rest of the sample, at 18 per cent. The information available did not indicate whether or not the participants had successfully completed the previous courses.

### **Analysing the data**

The data were categorised across of set of four main areas that corresponded to the research sub-questions proposed in Chapter 2: Literature Review. These categories were: (1) *the extent to which Openings students feel they understand the concept of reflective learning*; (2) *how Openings students orientate to reflective learning*; (3) *the extent to which Openings students feel the reflective writing tasks add value to the course*; and (4) *how the Openings students feel the course tutor promoted reflective learning on the course*. This was done by carefully reading each transcript in order to identify dialogue that seemed to address one of these four categories. Excerpts were then cut and pasted into a table that separated the data according to the four sub-questions. Each excerpt included its original source in terms of transcript and line numbers. Once this was done, the data were analysed again and grouped within the table according to similar responses and themes.

When filtered across the four research sub-questions, themes began to emerge that offered new categories to explore. These themes provided a framework for data interpretation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to this analytical

technique as the 'constant comparative method' and claimed that by comparing each piece of coded data to other categories, new categories will begin to surface (cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 165). Indeed, new themes did begin to emerge as coded data were compared and reorganised into these new categories. These themes will be discussed in the next two chapters. However, the rest of this chapter will present and discuss the way the data were analysed across the research sub-questions.

In the following interview extracts, the interviewer is referred to as 'Bethany' and the interviewees have been given pseudonyms in order to remain anonymous. The use of parentheses shows the reader where the other speaker has interjected a word or sounds. Square brackets denote something else happening while the participant is speaking.

*Sub-question 1: To what extent do Openings students feel they understand the concept of reflective learning?*

During the interviews, participants were asked to comment on how well they understood the role of the reflective tasks in the Openings course model. This question was posed within the context of the conversation so therefore took different forms. However, the responses from this line of questioning raised ideas on how learners made sense of the reflective tasks based on their own common sense definitions, their own experience, and their own perceptions of the Openings course.

One participant made reference to the reflective tasks as the 'review bits'; as something that was 'at the end'. This way of thinking was also reflected in her definition of the term 'reflection'.

Elaine:       Um, yeah, uh kinda uh review or I dunno, thinking about the kinda good points and bad points of what you've done.

Another participant felt that reflective tasks provided evidence that learning had taken place.

Bethany: What do you think the reason for having these tasks in a learning situation is though?

Ingrid: I think the reason is to make you think and view to yourself what your feelings, your opinions, your own opinions and what your impressions are, what you observe (mm-hmm) um, what you have observed and things like that and I think it proves whether you have absorbed the contents of what you've been reading.

Some Openings students held an existing conceptual framework of reflective learning from their experience in the workplace or on previous courses. Two of the participants were former teachers and here Joanne explains that her understanding of reflective learning came from this role. .

Joanne: Consciously I don't think I was aware, now that you are asking me that question. Mmm, honestly I don't think I had thought about it on a conscious level (mm-hmm)...I think I understood it because I have taught (mm-hmm). I have that background.

Another student, Hannah, expressed her understanding of reflective practice based on her role as a nurse.

Hannah: Um, well I work as a nurse and you obviously, you have reflective practice all the time. Usually reflecting on um critical incidents that have happened. And it's usually and you know the reason you reflect on things is to learn from it (mm-hmm) so it wasn't something that was completely new to me (mm-hmm). So it was something that I was quite comfortable doing.

Encounters with reflective activities in previous courses had also shaped the way learners understand the role of reflective learning in their Openings course.

Ross: I could see what they were getting at there and um having, again this is my biased view having already done some of them cos the MU120 has some reflective ones (mm-hmm) so I had already some experience but I think if I hadn't I would have still, still enjoyed what they were trying to get at...

Some students understood the role of reflective tasks as a way to get input from the tutor for improving learning and performance. This way of thinking is reflected in the following two examples.

Bethany: Do you see um, taking that then from-from how you use it in your own life, do you see how it translates to like a learning situation?

Doris: Um well it well yeah, because you, you try and improve the bits that are not possibly right. Why have I gone wrong here? So, it's like the paragraph thing so the next time I made sure I put the one line on you know [laughing] (yeah) so just you know trying to correct what you know I believe this is what they wanted to see you know personally, presentation wise, I wouldn't've done that but I knew that's what they wanted (mm-hmm) so on reflection I did what I felt they wanted to see (mm-hmm).

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Bethany: Good, and did you think some of the reflective tasks I mean did they, are they, are they new to you? That kind've concept?

Dorothy: Yeah (okay) yeah (okay) cos um at college doin' your work you just get your work back (mm-hmm) and you haven't got

to reflect on anything the teacher'll tell you you know there'd just a little note there sayin this is good or you need to add a bit more to this, which um her just saying that is not going to too in depth so you thinking about what you've done and your tutor telling you you know you've done this well and whatever did help you put in more the next time (mm-hmm).

Analysis of these data also indicated that some learners felt they understood the role of reflective learning more clearly over time. Some students sensed a deeper understanding of reflection as they completed the Learning Review at the end of the course. Others felt their understanding of reflective learning was stronger after taking another course or that it was clearer now that they had completed an Openings course. In this extract, Esther realised the rationale behind reflective learning after having completed the Openings course and moved on to a course in Social Sciences.

Bethany: Mm-hmm. Do you prefer that to the Openings style (ummm) or the other way?

Esther: Well now that it's further on it's probably all that's required whereas with the Openings ones I think you probably do need to look more about how you are actually studying and things.

#### *Sub-question 2: How do Openings students orientate to reflective learning?*

Each of the participants was asked whether or not they felt they were a naturally reflective person and what 'reflection' meant to them. The responses to these questions along with other, relevant comments made throughout the interviews were coded as orientation data. This section provides an overview of input from the participants regarding these ideas.

When asked whether or not they were a reflective person by nature, six of the twelve participants said 'yes' and six said 'no'. Clearly, there was a distinction between those that reflect and those that 'just get on with it', as Elaine put it. Another participant, Ruth, supported Elaine's attitude.

Ruth: I mean I do with my personal life but when I'm studying I like to just do it, get it done...

Participants' orientations to reflective learning varied. John found the reflective tasks more challenging than the actual coursework and expressed a general dislike for reflective tasks. Some students, such as Dorothy were comfortable with reflective activities, having experienced them in the workplace or on previous courses. Ross explained that it was this level of comfort that made reflective tasks easy since he already knew 'what approach to take'.

When asked to provide their own definitions of *reflection*, a range of ideas emerged. Doris explained reflection as a journey that looks at 'what you've done' and at 'how you achieved what you've done'. Another participant suggested that reflection happened when you applied an idea to your own life.

Joanne: I think it's when you stop and you think about it—what you may have read or what someone may have told you and you try to put it into your own words so that it makes more sense in your language, yeah.

Others contributed their ideas on how reflection had to do with *evaluation* and prompting *change*.

Esther: Umm, I suppose um thinking about the whole experience and evaluating um how you feel about it.

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Bethany: Okay, so it has a lot to do with thinking about what you've done?

Mary: Yeah, and about how to change things, how to better things.

Participants gave their own and varied definitions of reflection. Several participants defined reflection as synonymous with *introspection*, explaining it as 'looking inward' (John) and 'confronting something' within yourself (Soraya), while Ingrid suggested that the ability to reflect comes with age.

*Sub-question 3: To what extent do Openings students feel the reflective writing tasks add value to the course?*

Reflective writing is designed to take place in the Openings course when completing the Learning Plan and Learning Review, and as the final task of each tutor marked assignment (TMA) and end of course assessment (ECA). During the interviews, participants were asked what they thought about these reflective activities and whether or not these were useful to their own learning.

Several participants commented that they found the Learning Plan to be a helpful way to begin the course and the Learning Review as a good way to end the course.

Elaine: It [the Learning Plan] kind've uh put, made it clear for me exactly why I was doing it, and it was good at the end to kinda reflect and see if I'd achieved what I'd set out to do.

Some students suggested that the Learning Plan helped them to define their own objectives for learning, while the Learning Review helped to see which objectives had been met.

*On the Learning Plan:*

Ross: That was made clear in the first couple chapters there were reflective elements and they were saying what do you want to get from this course and I think they helped me and it did make me focus a bit more on why I was taking it...

*On the Learning Review.*

Joanne: I thought that that was a very good way to round it all up...because it had started off with you thinking about why you wanted to do this course, what was the point of it for you and it finished in a similar way in thinking about well you said that you wanted this at the beginning of the course, has that been fulfilled and other things that were related. (Mm-hmm) So I thought it was relevant.

Others perceived the Learning Plan as a valuable activity because it allowed the tutor to know more about the students.

Dorothy: I thought it was good because you sorta send it off to your tutor and then they seem to get to know a bit about you then don't they?

Despite these positive perceptions of how the Learning Plan and Learning Review added something worthwhile to the course, several participants perceived these activities as 'just another thing to do' (Elaine) and found these activities to be challenging and a source of frustration. These participants were keen to start learning the course subject and saw the Learning Plan as an obstruction.

John: You see, I suppose learning plans and things like that are standard, part of the standard learning procedure but all I wanted to do was get into the maths if you understand what I mean. I mean I got the learning plan in my head...all I wanted to do was study and...to actually put down on paper why I wanted to do that, how I wanted to do that, was uh difficult [laughing].



Unlike the non-compulsory reflective work that occurs in the Learning Plan and Learning Review, the reflective tasks at the end of each TMA and the ECA are actually marked against one particular learning outcome. One participant noted that these tasks are therefore valuable, if for no other reason, because they were assessed.

Ross:           Like I said, marks were made available for it so you were getting something for the effort.

Others found the reflective part of the TMAs to be helpful in developing study skills since they were asked to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and to identify strategies for development.

Dorothy:       ...cos it's the first time I'd done an essay in a long long time but when I came to do the second one it sorta helped you think, well I need to do this and not do that and things so yeah, it was quite good.

In spite of the value that some perceived these activities to add to the Openings experience, some participants felt these activities were pointless. Two reasons were given for this: the feeling that regardless of what was written in the reflective tasks, no real action would arise from it; and the short word count on these activities limited the value that was placed on the activity. Others commented that they felt these reflective activities were somewhat unnecessary even though they could see some value in them.

Bethany:       Mm-hmm, okay, and do you think that these activities in the course added value to your experience?

Esther:        I'm sure they did. Um. I found it sort of um. I suppose I have a slight feeling of it being unnecessary. I'd rather be sort've you know getting on with the coursework.

Bethany:       Right, so there's some of that as well, mm-hmm, yep.

Esther:        But I do see the value of it. You can actually spend quite a bit of time thinking about what you are going to say.

*Sub-question 4: How do Openings students feel the course tutor promotes reflective learning on the course?*

Participants were asked questions regarding the extent to which they discussed the reflective tasks with their tutors and whether or not they found the feedback on the reflective tasks to be useful. There was evidence that reflective dialogue does occur, mainly in the form of discussing how to do the reflective tasks, such as the Learning Plan.

John: He did, yes. (Okay) He did yeah, and we talked it through. In fact I rang him one night and said look, on the learning plan is it necessary or is it--and he said well I really would like it even if you make an absolute hash of it I you know I'd like to go through it with you afterwards as well, so yes he did.

However, these discussions were not always very lengthy or did not leave a lasting impression on learners. Some participants indicated that the reasons for these tasks were not clearly explained, nor were the students' responses to these tasks discussed afterward.

Bethany: Well, I think that, that is the first bit really. Did you have a discussion about the learning plan with your tutor?

Joanne: You know I can't really remember however, I do remember speaking for the first time with my tutor and she was telling me all the things I had to do and so I reckon that she would have told me that I had, that that was something that I had to do. I don't think I talked about it afterwards, but I really really can't remember. (Mmm) not sure.

Despite comments of this nature, students indicated that they had good relationships with their tutors and that they valued their tutors based on characteristics such as being 'available' (John), being 'patient' (Ingrid), making

them feel 'comfortable' (Dorothy), encouraging 'honest' answers (Joanne) and being able to have 'a good rapport' with them (Dorothy).

## Chapter 5: Interpreting the data

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The data were analysed by categorising interviewees' responses across four key areas to gain insight into the extent to which reflective learning activities add value to the Openings experience, from the students' perspectives. Several themes emerged from the data that are central to the main research question. This chapter will look at these emerging themes and will use examples from the data to support salient points.

### **Emerging themes**

The interview data presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate that students hold some definition of reflection and will probably be able to see some rationale for having reflective learning activities built into the Openings course model. These conceptual frameworks may be influenced by reflective work done on other courses or within the workplace, and seem to develop into clearer concepts over time. However, there is also evidence, which will be presented below to suggest that students' understanding of reflective learning is shaped by their own expectations of the Openings course, which may be influenced by the assignment specifications, the course design, the students' attitudes toward learning and the perceived role of the tutor.

#### *i. Reflection as self-assessment*

The Learning Plan asks Openings students to think about their personal reasons for taking the course and to identify their own learning objectives. The Learning Review asks learners to think about their Openings experience and to match their actual achievements to their initial objectives. The reflective writing activities on each of the TMAs require students to think about their own learning in terms of strengths and weaknesses. In this sense, reflective writing on the Openings course is presented, to some extent, as a self-assessment task.

The data showed that several of the respondents disliked the idea of self-assessment and found the reflective activities challenging as a result.

Bethany: The first thing they asked you to do was something called the Learning Plan. (Yes) How did you find that activity?

Ruth: I found it quite hard those.

Bethany: mm-hmm, why was that?

Ruth: It's just because I have to reflect on what I've done and I rarely look at myself and what I should've done and why I should've done it. That kind of thing. I just find those kind've activities kinda hard anyway.

---

Bethany: ...so the first one was the learning plan. Do you remember that?

Esther: I do.

Bethany: How did you find that activity?

Esther: Um, I can't say I really liked doing it.

Bethany: Why was that?

Esther: It's uh, it makes you I can see why you do it you know it makes you think about why what you're hoping to achieve um I'm not good at sort've evaluating myself so I don't find these things easy.

---

Elaine: I-I kinda struggle with these kinda things. I never really know what to say.

Personal aversions to self-assessment, therefore, could be barriers to reflective learning when reflective tasks are presented as self-assessment activities.

## *ii. Reflection as a separate activity*

Students' perceptions of reflective learning could be affected by the course design. The Learning Plan and Learning Review are not assessed and are not compulsory components of the Openings course model. Reflective writing tasks for both TMAs are presented as short, separate activities that are assessed against one of the eight learning outcomes for the course.

Doris commented that the short word count on the reflective tasks was not enough space for her to offer an adequate reflective statement.

Doris: Umm, well, again, 150, umm I don't think, I don't think you could've, it was quite difficult to express um possibly um how you felt you got on, and I think a couple of them asked me what sort of category and yeah with 150 words it's nothing is it really?

Other participants clearly saw reflection and learning as two separate activities since the reflective learning tasks were presented as a separate activity: Task B.

Elaine: I was actually reflecting (mm-hmm) I dunno sorta 10 minutes or so, just really, well no, I suppose a little bit more, maybe 20 minutes, um yeah, (okay, uh-huh) not too long.

---

Mary: Well, I think I would say that the reflective part is gonna be 10 percent and all the rest was like, I didn't take a lot of time for the reflective part I must say (mm-hmm, yeah).

## *iii. Reflection is a lower priority*

Previous excerpts provide evidence that reflective activities were prioritised lower than the content-based activities, and therefore lessened the value placed on these tasks. However, this could also be due to students' own attitudes toward learning. For example, some students prioritised the content-based activities

more than the reflective activities since they were more interested in the course subject.

John: [laughing] The point I'm trying to make is and I'm sure and I know it's important and I know it's something that I need to master but I wanted to get my teeth into the skills if you know what I mean, the content (mm-hmm). So doing a learning plan and uh, took me away from that a little bit (mm-hmm).

Bethany: Because that, that as the first thing that you were asked to do it didn't have anything to do with maths?

John: I think so, yeah. (okay) That's a fair comment, yeah.

Others seemed to view the reflective tasks as 'just another thing to do' (Elaine) and as being 'unnecessary' (Esther). This group of participants broadly differentiated themselves as people that preferred to 'just get on with it' (Elaine).

Ruth: I mean I do with my personal life but when I'm studying I like to just do it, get it done...

---

Esther: I think I just like to get on with something and not uh probably uh (mm-hmm) analyse the stuff.

---

Elaine: To be honest, the last couple, I've started off thinking, what-what has this, what has been good and what's been bad but now I'm just kinda making up answers [laughing]. I shouldn't say that.

Largely speaking this group felt the activities were not valuable for their own learning but could still see the value in it for other people.

Elaine: I can see why they're there and I'm sure they're useful for other people. Um, it could be an optional thing perhaps to

not actually have to do it cos I dunno, I personally don't find it very beneficial for myself, it's just another thing to do...

---

Bethany: I'm getting the impression that you didn't think they added a lot of value.

John: Not to me.

Bethany: Do you see where they could for someone else?

John: Oh, definitely...

The extent to which Openings students value the reflective tasks will invariably be affected by their own attitudes toward learning. In the data collected for this study, some participants preferred to focus only on learning the course subject and did not find much value in engaging in the reflective activities. Some rationalised that this was because of a personal inclination to get the work done rather than divide attention between content based work and reflective work. The fact that some of this group can still see the value of the reflective tasks for other learners could mean that there are reasons for these participants to see themselves as a separate group to the mainstream audience for which this course was written.

#### *iv. Feedback dependency*

One emergent theme from the data that were collected for this research was that Openings students perceived the reflective activities as a tool for generating feedback from the tutor. Figure 1 is the researcher's own depiction of what this model could look like.



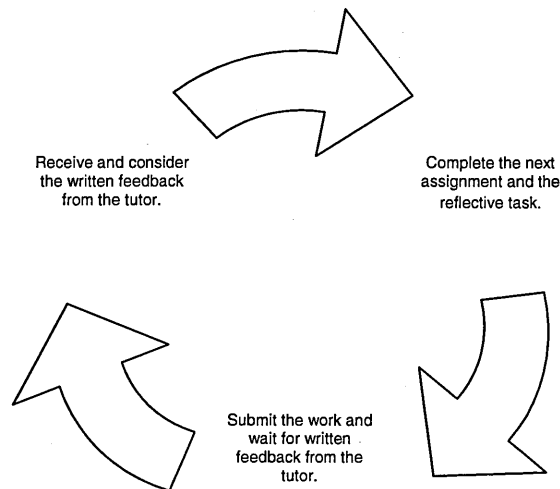


Figure 1: Feedback dependency model

In this model, students wait for written feedback from the tutor before completing and submitting the next assignment. Although this is a plausible concept, especially in a distance learning situation, this model has several implications regarding the facilitation of reflective learning.

First, Openings students perceive the reflective tasks as a tool for generating feedback from the tutor rather than as a tool for their own self-directed learning. In most every case in this project, participants seemed to think of feedback in terms of what to do differently on the next TMA. This included the feedback on the reflective tasks, since these are set up to assess the students' own strengths and weaknesses.

Dorothy: Umm, yeah, um, it did make you think (mm-hmm) um because your tutor would have told you like you know doing the referencing, I'd never done that before (mm-hmm) and um slightly got a little bit wrong and then like putting that right and you know you could say that I've put it right and then the next time you go and do it again I think it sorta, you remember what you're doing.

Second, Openings students depend on written feedback from the TMAs to be able to complete the next assignment. This includes feedback on the reflective tasks because the reflective activity on the second TMA is written in terms of how feedback is used to improve learning and performance.

Joanne: Well, certainly the very first time I had to do that and I got the feedback from my tutor it was very useful because I had forgotten to do certain things (mm-hmm) and because I had had then to write what it was that my tutor had told me in my feedback, and uh I think it was the second assignment (mm-hmm), you know then I thought oh yes I had to put my name on it and I had to put my PI number on [both laughing] and the page number. But I hadn't done that!

Third, when a reflective activity does not generate feedback, the loop is broken. Openings students find this to be a frustrating experience. This participant commented that although the reflective tasks in the TMAs asked students to identify their weaknesses, there was never a response from the tutor that addressed these points.

Elaine: Um, so I kinda find it a little bit pointless in that way because it doesn't matter what you put down, there's not gonna be anything come from it (mm-hmm).

These data also suggest that students feel most frustrated by a lack of feedback on the Learning Review.

Bethany: Did you review it again at the end of the course with the uh the other form called the Learning Review?

Doris: Umm, yes, I filled that, I filled that paperwork but I don't remember having any feedback from that neither because that went to the tutor didn't it?

Bethany: Yeah, that would've done.

- Doris: Yeah, so I don't seem to have any feedback from that [baby again].
- Bethany: Okay (baby) did you think that it would have been helpful to have feedback because maybe what you're experiencing now could've been um, I dunno, maybe could've dealt with some of those issues about where to go next?
- Doris: Yeah, I think so, umm I think so umm because in in in the beginning I sorta said my whole point to learning is to change career and get into this (mm-hmm) so um if you've got someone who's obviously, that knows the path that would give me the opportunity to achieve what I want to achieve then that's better than me tryin' to troll through tons websites and courses and not really know which one's, you know, really gonna be appropriate.

The feedback dependency model proposed in Figure 1 is supported by the way that the reflective tasks are written and by students' expectations of the tutor. This phenomenon may also be explained by the theories related to reflective orientation and levels of learning as discussed in Chapter 2. Wellington and Austin (1996), when developing a previous framework from Grimmer et al. (1990), suggested that practitioners (or learners) can have an 'immediate orientation' to reflection. This would mean that they tended to focus on 'the immediate demands of the group or on the task at hand' rather than on practices that sought 'personal meaning' such as those with a 'deliberative orientation' or 'personal liberation', like those with a 'transpersonal orientation' (in Wellington and Austin, 1996, pp. 309-311).

Largely speaking, Openings students may exhibit characteristics of an immediate orientation. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, this could also be impacted by their level of learning. Butler (1996) suggested that there were five stages of competence development, with the first two being 'novice' and 'advanced

beginner' (pp. 277-278). Learners at these two stages would have little room for reflection since they are spending much of the time following the 'rules'. These theories suggest that learners at beginning levels or stages, in this case Openings students, may depend on the tutor during the learning process. While this dependency is not necessarily a negative thing, as also discussed in Chapter 2, it may be a hindrance to facilitating self-directed reflective learning.

This chapter outlined four themes that emerged from the analysis of these interview data and identified areas where these themes could be discussed in terms of the literature presented in Chapter 2. Findings and implications of these themes are discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Findings

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Analysis of the data identified many interesting areas regarding students' learning experiences on the Openings programme. However, the central focus of this research was to look at learners' perceptions of the reflective learning components in the Openings course model in order to evaluate the extent to which these activities added value to the learning experience. Themes that emerged from analysing the data were outlined and discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter will summarise the main findings based on these themes and will reflect on the research in terms of the limitations of the project and the validity of its findings. The dissertation will conclude with a discussion of further research that may be relevant to explore.

### *Findings*

1. Some learners have an aversion to self-assessment exercises and therefore find the reflective learning activities in the Openings programme challenging.

At present, the reflective learning task on the first assignment is designed in a way that asks students to identify strengths and weaknesses. Also, the Learning Plan asks students to identify areas they wish to develop. This research has found that some students find these activities difficult because they are presented as self-assessment tasks and may have trouble expressing their ideas as a result.

2. Some learners do not prioritise the reflective learning tasks because they are presented as a separate activity from the content-based tasks, because they are given a lower word count and (in the case of the Learning Plan and Learning Review) because they are not assessed.

This suggests that further research could explore situations in which students would prioritise reflective learning tasks. This might include trials where the

assignments are written in a way that integrates reflection into the written assessment, rather than having it as a separate task. This finding also raises the question of whether students would prioritise the Learning Plan and the Learning Review if they were presented as assessed, compulsory components of the course.

3. Some learners find the reflective learning tasks pointless because these activities keep them from the actual coursework.

Students who are keen to get into the core curriculum find it frustrating that tasks such as the Learning Plan demand some of their attention. Students in this group also tend to perceive themselves as a separate group of learners who just want to 'get on with it'. Interestingly, they can see the value of the reflective tasks for those outside this group. This finding raises the question of why students see themselves as belonging to a separate group. However, another question that is perhaps more relevant to this research, is how Openings students, regardless of how they orientate to reflective activities, can still find value in reflective tasks.

4. Openings students are dependent on written feedback from the tutor in order to fully engage in reflective learning activities.

This seems to be the case for three reasons: a) students perceive the reflective tasks as a way to generate feedback from the tutor; b) students need feedback in order to complete the next assignment; c) students are frustrated when their reflective work does not prompt action from the tutor. Further research in this area could look at how the work that is done by the tutor and the course model affects feedback dependency. Additionally, it would be pertinent to the pedagogical development of reflective learning to examine the extent to which feedback dependency hinders self-directed

learning. Explanations for feedback dependency, as discussed in the previous chapter could provide theoretical groundwork for exploration.

### *Limitations of the project*

In a general sense, the responses from the participants regarding their learning experience on the Openings programme were very positive. Findings presented here are based on a line of questioning that specifically discussed the reflective learning activities. Limitations of this project, therefore, include the fact that not all facets of the learning experience can be mentioned or explored. The choice to address the research question by looking at the learners' perspectives limits the study in terms of input from Openings tutors, the Course Team and other stakeholders.

Time constraints also limited the research. As explained in Chapter 3, time and money were some of the factors in deciding to collect data through telephone interviewing rather than through face-to-face accounts or focus groups. As noted in Chapter 4, the interviews ranged from 5 minutes to 22 minutes, with a modal length of 13 minutes. The chosen method could have played a role in limiting the responses from participants, thereby resulting in shorter interviews. Given more time in which to collect data, perhaps face-to-face interviews could have occurred and perhaps this would have resulted in the collection of more rich data. Shuy (2001, p. 541), for example, suggested that face-to-face interviews resulted in a 'greater likelihood of self-generated answers'. However, a modal interview length of 13 minutes is not entirely unreasonable in light of the length of time Openings students are used to speaking on the telephone with their own tutors. From experience, the researcher felt that this length of time mirrored standard practice in telephone tutorials in the course. Additionally, the fact that the respondents had received the interview protocol in advance could have meant that their responses had been considered beforehand and the conversation was more succinct as a result.

Time also limited the scope of the project. Data were collected from Openings students who had enrolled in and completed the November 2008 presentation. Participants were accessed after they had completed the course, which meant that the findings of this research are based on a snapshot of learners' perceptions at the time of data collection. More time may have allowed a longer study to be carried out that collected data throughout the Openings experience. For example, Sub-question 1: *How do Openings students understand reflective learning activities?* could have been approached by looking at conceptualisations of reflective learning frameworks before, during and after the course, if more time would have been available for this project.

### *Validity of the findings*

Hopefully this research project is designed in a way that forms a foundation for further study and that allows for replication so that the validity of the findings can be strengthened through consensus from different sample groups. However, threats to validity do exist in this project and include the timing of the project and the presence of the researcher.

Weaknesses of the study can be found in the way that the timing of the study may have affected the data. Ewert and Sibthorp (2009) labelled 'social desirability', 'postexperience euphoria', 'postexperience adjustment' and 'response shift bias' as postexperience variables (pp. 381-382). These variables may have been present in this study and depending on the length of time between completing the Openings course and participating in the interview, the participants' ability to remember their learning experience may have been affected. Furthermore, a low response rate from the first sample group meant that there was a lapse of several weeks between data collection from one group to the next. This additional time lag may have exacerbated the situation.

Although the four principal findings of this dissertation did not all deal with value, the project set out with a central aim of providing a qualitative study of added



value. Therefore, of the efforts that were made in valuing reflective learning from an Openings student's perspective, there exist potential threats to validity. Ewert and Sibthorp (2009) explained the difficulty in accounting for 'confounding variables' when documenting the value of evidence-based experiential education. They suggested that due to the 'broad constellation' of variables before, during and after the learning experience, research may be distorted (p. 376). Many of these variables would be present in this research design as well and need to be acknowledged as potential threats to validity as the research is collected, analysed and recorded.

The presence of the researcher throughout the telephone interviews could have threatened the validity of the data. The researcher has taught on the Openings programme (Y159: Understanding Management) for four years and holds her own set of beliefs about the way in which learners value reflective learning in the course. The researcher tried to minimise any potential effect through a conscious attempt at not imposing these beliefs during data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the participants knew the researcher only in terms of being the researcher and therefore would not have had the opportunity to react to her background as an Openings tutor. However, there are strengths associated with the researcher's background, such as her knowledge of the Openings programme and of its members, that lent a general sympathy to the project and that could have helped the participants feel comfortable constructing an account of their experience in their dialogue with her.

#### *Opportunities for further research*

This dissertation, as a journey, offered many interesting facets to explore along the way. On reflection, it was, at times, difficult to maintain a focus on the vein of this research since other research 'sub-questions' could have been raised and probed. Some of these questions, however, form a set of ideas to be considered in future research.

The link between deep learning and reflective learning is one of interest, especially in terms of the implications this has for novice learners in higher education. Although this dissertation set out to look at this link initially, it was determined that the subject was too broad for this project, considering the constraints of time and resources.

Additionally, a study of how Openings students orientate to reflective learning is a subject that could be explored, much more so than what has been done in this dissertation. In asking participants to explain their own conceptualisations of reflection, a general sense of meaning emerged in this dissertation. However, a phenomenological study on the subject would offer a deeper insight of how students relate to the 'meaning structures embedded' in their own lives when engaging in reflective learning (Van Manen, 1977, p. 215). A study of this nature would work to extract and interpret these meanings.

Finally, when considering the last finding of this dissertation of feedback dependency, it seems relevant to explore the link between reflection and independent learning. A study of this nature may seek to illuminate distance learning pedagogy in terms of how to facilitate learning through reflection to efficiently and effectively achieve transformational, self-directed learning environments.

This dissertation, as well as the other modules that comprise the Master of Research degree, has been a tremendous learning experience. This research has attempted to produce findings that contribute to the existing knowledge of reflective learning, especially in terms of widening participation courses such as those found in the Openings programme. Furthermore, this dissertation has raised relevant, interesting areas for further research in the field.

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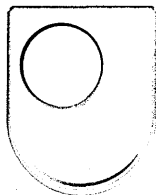
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## Appendix A: Introduction Letter



The Open University

Centre for Widening  
Participation

The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
United Kingdom  
MK7 6AA

### Invitation to participate in research for your recent Openings course

Dear [Name]

Congratulations on completing your recent Openings course. You have been randomly selected to participate in a research project that may help learn more about your learning experience.

This research project will be conducted by Bethany Alden, a full time research student from the Centre for Research in Education and Education Technology (CREET) in the Open University.

As part of her project she will be conducting telephone interviews to learn more about your thoughts on the course you just completed. She is very interested to know what you thought about the reflective activities, such as the Learning Plan, Learning Review and the final tasks on each TMA. A list of interview questions is on the reserve side of this letter for you to read through. This will give you an idea of the areas that she would like to learn more about.

The interviews will last between 20 and 30 minutes. These can be arranged to fit around your busy schedule. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The transcription will not include your name or PI number so that your responses will remain anonymous in the written report.

If you are willing to participate in these interviews please:

- read and complete the attached student consent form  
**and**
- return in the pre-paid envelope supplied by **6 July 2009**.

Once we have received your consent form, Bethany will telephone you to set up a date and time for your interview. Your assistance in this project is greatly appreciated. Your input will provide valuable data that could be used to learn more about the Openings experience in general, particularly the way in which students engage in reflective learning.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Yours sincerely,

*Jonathan Hughes*

*Alice*

Jonathan Hughes, Course Chair Y156 and Y163 and Alice Peasgood, Course Chair Y162

## Appendix B: Student Consent Form

*Title of Project: Learners' perceptions of reflective components within the Openings course model*

If you are willing to take part in this research project please tick the box, complete the details below and return the signed form in the envelope provided. At any time during the research you are free to withdraw and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from you, up to the point at which data are aggregated for analysis.

Your participation or non-participation will not affect your access to tutorial support or the results of your assessments.

The results of any research project involving Open University students constitute personal data under the Data Protection Act. They will be kept secure and not released to any third party. All data will be destroyed once the project is complete.

- ☐ I am willing to take part in this research, and I give my permission for the data to be collected through a recorded telephone interview and to be used in an anonymous form in any written reports, presentations and published papers relating to this study. My written consent will be sought separately before any identifiable data are used in such dissemination.

Signing this form indicates that you understand the purpose of the research, as explained in the covering letter, and accept the conditions for handling the data you provide.

Name: .....  
(please print)

Student PI: .....

Signed: .....

Date: .....

**Please return completed form to (using the SAE):**

Bethany Alden  
Research Student  
Institute of Educational Technology  
The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
Telephone: 07955 352 120  
Email: [B.A.Alden@open.ac.uk](mailto:B.A.Alden@open.ac.uk)

If you would like to discuss this research in more detail prior to signing this form, please contact myself (on the number above). Alternatively, you could discuss the research with a third party by emailing Professor John Richardson: [j.t.e.richardson@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.t.e.richardson@open.ac.uk).

## **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

The interview will be semi-structured and will last between 20 and 30 minutes. Questions will be centred on the following themes.

### **Approach to Study**

How did you approach the studying for this course?

-Was there anything that particularly easy or difficult?

Is there anything that you would do differently in studying on another course?

### **Awareness of reflective activities**

To what extent were you aware of the concept of reflective learning throughout this course?

- Learning Plan
- TMA reflective statements
- ECA reflective statement

What did you think about the Learning Review at the end of the course?

### **Engagement**

How much did you engage with the reflective tasks as opposed to the content-based tasks?

(If you didn't submit a Learning Plan or Learning Review, why was this?)

How did you find the feedback on the reflective tasks (on the TMAs)?

### **Value-added**

How do you think these reflective tasks help you in this course?

What does it mean to be reflective?



## Appendix D: Excerpt from transcript 4

[start]

- B: Let me just make sure it's going...yep! Okay, It's going. Okay, well I know it's been awhile since you've um probably thought about the course even but um it's the Openings course that you started in November (yeah) and um and in thinking back about that, um how did you feel about the reflective activities they asked you to do along the way?
- D: Um, fine. It does make you think, um, well during where I work we have to evaluate our lessons and um activities that we used so I am quiet used to uh sorta thinking about how things have worked and whatever but doing it as a learning thing is a bit, it makes you think slightly differently. (mm-hmm, okay) But it was good cos you can, after doing the first one, cos it's the first time I'd done an essay in a long long time but when I came to do the second it one sorta helped you think, well I need to do this and not do that and things so yeah, it was quite good (mm-hmm).
- B: Okay, um where do you work?
- D: I work in a preschool.
- B: Okay, so um was the course you were doing the childcare course?
- D: Well it um (the Openings...) yeah, some of it was (okay), about how children behave.
- B: Okay, right okay. (It was...) Was it the psychology...?
- D: Um, no, it was just um like one of my boys is very lively and you know we're having a few problems with him and things like that but um reading (mm-hmm) how like the parents um come across and um how his parents talked to me about him and things like that (mm-hmm), you thought, well, it's all general across the board, init? (mm-hmm, okay)
- B: You know the-the learning plan at the very beginning of the course? (yeah) Um, how did you find that activity?
- D: Umm, okay (mm-hmm). I thought it was good because you sorta send it off to your tutor and then they seem to get to know a bit about you then don't they? (mm-hmm) Why you're doing it and um what you want to get out of it kinda thing so (right, yeah) so it was good.
- B: Good. At the end of the class did you get a chance to do the learning review?
- D: Yeah, I did remember to do that one [both laughing].
- B: Did you, I mean was it something that you discussed with your tutor (yes) and then kinda looked back (yeah...)
- D: Yeah, she did say to fill it in and sorta send it off to her and I had a really good um rapport with my tutor so um we talked about the work and had a little chat as well so it was really nice (mm-hmm) and she made you feel at ease (mm-hmm) and things so um, the um, the, looking back, what were your goals and things like that the, it, sorta changes halfway though sometimes doesn't it. You might think you are setting out to do something (mm-hmm) but because you've learnt something else, your goals might have sorta changed a little bit so when you're reviewing at the end you might thing Oh! Well actually

I was meant to be thinking about doing this and I've gone off to a different tangent a little bit [laughing].

B: Yeah, it does happen. (good) um, were you goals mostly about studying or did they also have to do with kind've personal goals?

D: Um, personal really. (mm-hmm) Umm I have applied to do um like the next sorta level up cos I didn't, I've never done an Open University course before (mm-hmm). So I wanted to do this one to see whether it was for me because I haven't been studying for the last three years in a classroom (mm-hmm) so um even though you work on your own at home doing your homework but in the classroom you've got everyone's input and point of view so you can go away thinking about um your homework in a different kinda thing (mm-hmm) but this is more like what you think (right) so um (okay) it was better cos I didn't want to stop doin studying (mm-hmm) cos if you stop then I'd be like I wouldn't want to go back and do anything else (mm-hmm).

B: [both laughing] Yeah I can understand that. Well, along the way, then when you did the TMAs, you know the second part of each TMA they ask you to do a little brief um reflective task where you where they ask you questions of what you found easy and what you found difficult (yeah) and what you'd change. Um when you were doing that sort've reflective writing, did you feel that that was adding value to the course?

D: Umm, yeah, um, it did make you think (mm-hmm) um because your tutor would have told you like you know doing the referencing, I'd never done that before (mm-hmm) and um slightly got a little bit wrong and then like putting that right you know you could say that I've put it right and then the next time you go and do it again I think it sorta, you remember what you're doing.

B: Okay, so it's reinforcing (yeah, reinforcing) some of...

D: Yeah, and making sure you've got it cos you're not in a classroom where you can put your hand up and say did I do this right (mm-hmm) where here, I mean I know you can phone your tutor, but sometimes you think I can't keep phoning her up about the same thing all the time [shared laughter].

B: So how did you feel about the feedback you received on that-that reflective bit at the end of each TMA?

D: Yeah, it was good (was that helpful?) er um lots of positive comments, which is, which is good (mm-hmm), cos I sorta think if um, well like where I work you've gotta give like five positives to one negative kinda thing (mm-hmm) so it does boost your confidence a little bit doesn't it so...

B: Yeah, well, good. That's-that's a good thing.

D: Yeah, and um that was good that uh you know then and at the end she's just say but you could've done this so that was um it was good the way it was all worded and things it was all it was helpful because it didn't, she didn't um put you done this wrong you done that wrong and whatever cos I think you would've not bothered [laughing] carrying on [shared laughter].

B: Well, it's the first um course that a lot of people take after not being in formal education for awhile (yeah) so it's really helpful to have that encouragement (yeah) I think. I think that's part of the point of the course too is to build confidence and (yeah, cos I mean...) that sort of thing (yes).

- D: Yeah, I don't think you should sorta sign up to a 3 year course if you've never done that kinda thing before (mm-hmm). I think they'd be sorta throwing yourself in at the deep end. But I think this little course was just enough really to uh think, you know get you thinking about whether you want to carry on or not (mm-hmm).
- B: Have you decided whether or not you'd like to do something?
- D: Yeah, I've put into do, well it's just changed now, but I've put down to do um the early years developing practice.
- B: Okay and is that a 60 point?
- D: Yes
- B: Okay, so that's, that's quite a lot of, that's a lot more intense probably than what you had on the (well yeah to what I've just done but...). Openings,
- D: Yeah, but I got my teeth into this kinda thing so (right) you know I finished it off before my uh, before the time I had to actually do it.
- B: Wow! Okay
- D: [garbled]
- B: [laughing] So that's brilliant! So, did you feel when, um I don't know what your other educational, uh your background is but um did you feel that when you approached the studying on this course, I mean what kinda approach did you, did you take?
- D: I think, going, because um I'd gotten this job in a nursery and doing my NVQ 1 2 and I'd just finished 3 when I started this one (mm-hmm), I um got um sorta stuck into doing something for me (mm-hmm) and I'm thinking yeah I can do you know, I can better myself where at school it's like uh you know uh you know people go and play sports and things like that and not actually thinking about a career and things like that (mm-hmm) and now I have my children and that and now I'm thinking oh you know I wanna settle down and do something that you know I can feel proud for myself that I have achieved (mm-hmm). So doing this has sorta pushed me in the right direction really.
- B: Good, and did you think some of the reflective tasks I mean did they, are they, are they new to you? That kind've concept?
- D: Yeah (okay) yeah (okay) cos um at college doin your work you just get your work back (mm-hmm) and you haven't got to reflect on anything the teacher'll tell you you know there'd just a little note there sayin this is good or you need to add a bit more to this, which um her just saying that is not going to too in depth so you thinking about what you've done and your tutor telling you you know you've done this well and whatever did help you put in more the next time (mm-hmm).
- B: Okay, well at the beginning of the course when you first, like the learning plan and those first reflective things they asked you to do, um, like uh, how well did you understand the reason they were there?
- D: Umm, I think it's because of I've, we have to reflect our lessons at school (mm-hmm) you know, are the children learnin? Did it work? (mm-hmm) or how could you have done it differently, the different development stages of the your key children that you've got umm I didn't think is was bad, I did get

- the hang of it kinda thing but um I don't know if, it does make you think whether you're actually doin your work right (mm-hmm, yeah).
- B: Yeah, well it sounds like because you're doing this also in your work the reflective learning and development, it sounds like you have a framework in your head, like you have an idea in your head (yeah) about why that is there and and what it's, what the purpose of it is (yeah, so).
- D: Yeah, I don't if, because I've never done that before in the work that I've done before I've never had to do that (mm-hmm) so I don't whether reading that case, thinking about you know what you could've done better or what you know (mm-hmm) might not've, might not come across to some people the same way.
- B: Um, okay. Um, did you tutor kinda explain why that was there.
- D: Yeah, she uh, we got on really well and she was really nice (mm-hmm) so she made you feel really comfortable about what you were doing (good) and them things so (mm-hmm) that makes a big difference (mm-hmm)
- B: Okay, um, when you, the, thinking about the approach to the study, cos it sounded like you took a pretty thorough approach, it sounds like you had a lot of intrinsic, internal motivation because it was something you were doing for yourself. (yes) Um, was there anything in the study part of the course, um developing study skills that you found particularly easy on the Openings course?
- D: Um, I suppose once you got sorta stuck into it to think 2000 words was quite hard. [laughing]
- B: [laughing] Yeah, I can imagine yeah.
- D: Um, cos you think oh my god I've got to come up with 1000 words, but it's not a lot really is it? (mm-mmn, no, no it's not) no so um and I've never had to do that kinda thing before where I've had to do a word, you know stick to a certain word limit (mm-hmm) and things so I (mm-hmm) and not enough and (mm-hmm) it was just sorta getting the right, right meat, the right bit in there that you know you've got the for and against and (mm-hmm) the that was weird as well cos I've never had to get to think of other people's you know once, you think of your side of the story but you have to think of the other side as well (mm-hmm) which is different for me because I've never had to do that before.
- B: [laughing] Have you started your next course yet?
- D: No, I'm waiting to see if I'll get any financial help first (oh right).
- B: Okay, when does it start though?
- D: It doesn't start till October (yeah okay) I think or whatever so I'll just send that off to see whether I can (okay) it's a lot of money otherwise (uh-huh, yeah).
- B: [both laughing] Most are yeah. I was just wondering like in terms of study skills is there anything now that you're-you're gonna take to this new course, um and do differently?
- D: Umm, I don't think I'd do anything differently cos the last, the TMA we sent off to the university marks I got achieved on all of them apart from one mark so obviously I must've (mm-hmm) must have done it right sorta thing to get achieved on all the things (uh-huh, yeah). What I done at the beginning was

- write down um the headings you had to cover (mm-hmm) and then I found that easier for me to write my headings down and then write my essay and then go through and tick off and make sure that I'd covered them all.
- B: Ok, so you used, you mean the headings do you mean the learning outcomes (yeah)
- D: Yeah, the learning outcomes (looking through the book) yeah, the learning outcomes, there were 8 learning outcomes altogether (uh-huh) I found it easier if I wrote the headings down (mm-hmm) and then when I read through I work I thought oh I've covered that and I've covered that and I've covered that (mm-hmm) so I found that...
- B: To use it as a checklist (yeah) to make sure you've done everything.
- D: Yeah, to make sure I've covered every sort of thing they require and to put both sides of the argument in as well so I (mm-hmm) found it easier to do that way.
- B: Okay good.
- D: That's probably a long-winded way round but. [laughing]
- B: Well it works cos you know it's part of the course is trying to pass the course isn't it?
- D: Yeah
- B: Um, well I was just wondering if you did like a pie chart in terms of the uh time you spent doing different things activities on the course if you separated the reflective activities from the content-based activities what percentage of the time would you say you spent on the reflective activities?
- D: Not long.
- B: Okay, would you say, oh I don't even know, a tenth of the course?
- D: Um yeah I think so, I think once you've read you've, you know, you've thought about what you've done and whatever, I mean you're either happy with the work that you've done. I think I think if I wasn't happy with the work that I'd done (mm-hmm) then maybe I might've gone back and done a bit more about it kinda thing (mm-hmm) but um I was happy with what I'd done and took into account what my tutor had said in the previous TMA (mm-hmm) so um I think if I wasn't sure then maybe I'd go back and re-read it and you know do a little bit more but I think as far as I was concerned that it was you know, it was okay.
- B: Okay. do you think, this kinda more a personal question, but do you think in your day-to-day life you are a reflective person by nature.
- D: Not by nature [laughing] (okay) I probably am more now cos I'm doing it at work (uh-huh) but I don't think well I dunno.
- B: Well, maybe I should ask it differently. What would be your definition of reflection?
- D: Ummm (in simple terms is fine) I don't know. Day-to-day I wouldn't think I'd reflect on much but maybe um after a couple of weeks you'd be thinking about what you'd done (okay) and you know if you've been away a couple months down the line thinking that you had a good time doin this and things and then thinking oh maybe you could go do that again (uh-huh) but not on a general day-to-day basis (okay) I don't think I am.

- B: So, so in your world it-it has to do with thinking about something you've done in the past (yeah) and how (yeah) well good. I don't think I have a lot of other questions [laughing] but do you have any questions for me?
- D: Mmm, no I don't think so.
- B: Okay, well it sounds like you enjoyed your course.
- D: I did actually
- B: Great. And it sounds like it led you to something else?
- D: Yeah, just waiting for a letter to come through now to say we're gonna give you some money towards it
- B: Well, I hope so too. Is the financial support coming from the university or from the workplace?
- D: The university
- B: Okay, right, well good. Fingers crossed.
- D: Yeah, that course will be good. Has a bit of practical in it which is good
- B: Yeah, sounds like you're someone they need to keep so they better find a way to do that! (laughing).
- B: Well, if you get to thinking that there was anything else you'd like to add to what you said today, you can feel free to ring me or email me. Do you have that number?

**[email is exchanged here and conversation ends]**

## Appendix E: Application to Student Research Project Panel

### Student Research Project Panel Application Form

Please note that:

- An application must be submitted and approved before the start of the proposed research
- Please allow at least 3 weeks from application for notification of a decision from the Panel
- Prior consultation with the IET Survey Office ([g.j.elliott-Cirigottis@open.ac.uk](mailto:g.j.elliott-Cirigottis@open.ac.uk)) is advised with regard to the sample and any other services (where applicable) before filling in this form and submitting your application.

For submission and further help please contact: [IET-SRPP@open.ac.uk](mailto:IET-SRPP@open.ac.uk)

#### Section One: Applicant Details

##### 1. Applicant Details: Lead Researcher

<b>Name:</b>	Bethany Alden
<b>Email:</b>	B.A.Alden@open.ac.uk
<b>Faculty/Unit:</b>	CREET/IET
<b>OUCU:</b>	baa75

##### 2. Other Research Personnel

Please give details of all other personnel associated with the research.

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Faculty/Unit/Agency/Sponsor:</b>
John Richardson	IET (Research supervisor)
Maki Kimura	CHERI (Research supervisor)

### 3. Consultation with other OU staff over research.

Please indicate whether the research involves the following and whom you have contacted:

Unit:	Contact name:
Marketing	
Regional Office	
Faculty Associate Dean or Course Team	Tina Forbes, Course Manager (Y156, Y157, Y158, Y160, Y163, Y166); Jim Bailey, Course Manager (Y159, Y161, Y162, Y164); Tony Darkes, Course Chair (Y157); Anita Pacheco/Chris Williams, Course Chairs (Y160); Alice Peasgood, Course Chair (Y161, Y162); M. O'Day, Course Chair (Y160); Jonathan Hughes, Course Chair (Y163)
Student Services – Regions	
Student Services – Planning	
Student Services – other areas	
Residential Schools Office	
IET Survey Office	Nick Haycox
IET – other areas	Chetz Colwell and Jane Wilson
Strategy Unit	Chris Baker, Alice Peasgood and Jonathan Hughes, George Marsh and Julie Gowens of the Centre for Widening Participation
PhD Supervisor	John Richardson and Maki Kimura
VCE	
Other	



## Section Two: About your research

### 4. Research details:

Title of Research:	Learners' perceptions of reflective components of the Openings course model
Target Start Date:	01/04/09
Target End Date:	07/09/09

### 5. Brief aims of the research (maximum 250 words):

1. To understand the way in which Openings students perceive the embedded reflective learning components of the Openings course model. (In terms of awareness, approach to study, engagement and perceived value).
2. To inform the Centre for Widening Participation (CWP) of The Open University as to the learners' perceptions of these reflective components.
3. To fulfill the requirements of the Master of Research dissertation.

### 6. Will this research be repeated?

(Please tick)

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
------------------------------	--

If yes, how often?

--

### 7. Is there any overlap with any previous or current research?

(Please tick)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
---	-----------------------------

If yes, please explain.

The Centre for Widening Participation is liaising with IET (Chetz Colwell) to research the perceptions of the Associate Lecturers in relation to the embedded reflective elements of the Openings courses.

CWP as well as the individual Course Chairs/Managers are supportive of this research.

**8. Data collection methods - please indicate your proposed research method(s):**  
(Please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Paper	<input type="checkbox"/> Focus Group
<input type="checkbox"/> Online	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Telephone	Please specify other:
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal interview	

**9. Please explain how the research will be disseminated internally to OU researchers and staff and detail any plans for external publication/dissemination of your findings:**

The completed MRes dissertation will be held by the MRes office and the Open University Library. The Centre for Widening Participation has also asked for a copy of the research findings.

**Section Three: Sample**

**10. a) Please specify details:**

Course/s	Presentation/s	Sample No. requested	Aimed for 'response rate'
<i>e.g. AAA111</i>	<i>2007K</i>	<i>1000</i>	<i>500 or 50%</i>
Y156	2008K	25	5 or 20%
Y162	2008K	25	5 or 20%
Y163	2008K	25	5 or 20%

**10. b) Please specify full level of detail required:**

*e.g. Pls, Region 1, female, completed course, only postcodes in Milton Keynes etc.*

Random sample of people that have completed the course and are available to take part in research.

#### Section Four: Questionnaire Design

This section is only necessary if you require Survey Office assistance.

11. Survey Type: Postal ☐ Electronic ☐ Other (Please explain below) ☐

A letter of introduction (with consent form and stamped return envelope) will be sent to each member of the sample. Assistance from the Survey Office in mailing these letters would be very appreciated. \*\*There is no questionnaire. Data will be collected through telephone interviews.\*\*

#### 12. Postal scanning:

Is this required? Yes: ☐ No: ☒

If yes, how many questions (including sub questions) are to be scanned?

Do you wish the Survey Office to prepare the Questionnaire?

Yes: ☐ No: ☐

If yes, when will the final questions be supplied to the Survey Office?

#### 13. Survey Mailing:

Target mailing date:

Reminder required:

Yes: ☐ No: ☐

Close of Survey date:

Is this date approximate or definite?

**Approx:**

☐

**Definite:**

☐

#### 14. Data Processing:

Please specify any special requirements below for dataset requests:

The gender, age (as of 1/4/09) and education background of the sample members.

#### 15. Finance:

Please indicate funding arrangements:

**Baseline:**

☐

**Internal:**

☒

**External:**

☐

*Baseline = payment will be made in advance of work being carried out*

*Internal = payment will be made by an OU Department*

*External = payment will be made by external organisation*

#### Section Five: Supporting Documentation

#### 16. Documentation

Please do not forget to attach the required supporting documentation with your application. Indicate below which items of supporting documentation you have sent as attachments with this Application:

<input type="checkbox"/> Copy of survey instrument/s	<input type="checkbox"/> Note/email from Sponsor (if applicable)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Copy of covering letter/s or invitation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Copy of consent form (if applicable)

☒

I can confirm that a Data Protection Questionnaire has been submitted to the University's Planning Officer (Legislation and Information) – [Data-Protection@open.ac.uk](mailto:Data-Protection@open.ac.uk)

**Application  
date:**

04/03/09

Please submit to: [IET-SRPP@open.ac.uk](mailto:IET-SRPP@open.ac.uk) (Please remember to 'save' the form first to attach to email)

## Appendix F: Human Participants and Materials

### Ethics Committee (HPMEC) proforma

Please complete and send to:

**John Oates (j.m.oates@open.ac.uk)**, Chair,  
Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC)  
Centre for Childhood Development and Learning (CHDL),  
Briggs, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes

**Also send a copy to Research-ethics@open.ac.uk**

If you have any queries before you fill in this form please look at the  
Research Ethics (intranet) web site: <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>

#### Title of project

A short, descriptive title.

Learners' perceptions of reflective components of the Openings course model

#### Schedule

Time frame for the research and its data collection phase(s).

April-May: Literature Review (Literature Review due 2<sup>nd</sup> May for MRes) and  
data collection (telephone interviews)

May-June: Data analysis (Research proposal due 2<sup>nd</sup> June for MRes)

June-July: Draft dissertation (due 1<sup>st</sup> August for MRes)

August-September: Final draft of dissertation (due 8<sup>th</sup> September for MRes)

#### Abstract

A summary of the main points of the research, written in terms easily understandable by  
a non-specialist and containing no technical terms.

The central aim of the research is to determine how/if Openings students  
perceive the reflective tasks, which are embedded in the course model, to add  
value to their learning experience.

Questions will focus on discovery around four broad themes:

1. How do these learners perceive their **approach** study and learning?
2. How **aware** are these learners of the reflective tasks; the purpose of the  
tasks; the concept of reflective learning/practice?
3. To what extent do these learners **engage** with the reflective tasks?
4. Do these learners perceive the reflective tasks to **add value** to their  
experience on the course?

#### Source(s) of funding

Details of the external or internal funding body (e.g. ESRC, MRC).

The research is funded by CREET through a 1+3 MRes/PhD studentship.

### **Justification for research**

What contribution to knowledge, policy, practice, and people's lives the research will make?

The Openings Programme is a Widening Participation strategy of the Open University. The courses are designed to promote HE study and to act as a pathway for further study. A focus on study skills and reflective learning is part of this model.

These courses are delivered by the Centre for Widening Participation. They are 20 weeks long and students are mainly supported through telephone tutorials.

This research will contribute to the existing knowledge of how learners engage with the Openings courses. More specifically, this research will look at the ways in which learners on three particular Openings courses perceive the reflective tasks that are built into this model.

The research may also inform practice by highlighting considerations for the Centre for Widening Participation (of the Open University). These considerations may be used in the development of existing and future Openings courses.

If this research was used to inform and change practice, future learners on Openings courses may engage differently with the reflective tasks and hopefully enjoy a richer learning experience (or one that meets the intended aims of the course model).

### **Investigators**

Give **names** and **units** of all persons involved in the collection and handling of individual data. Please name **one** person as **Principal Investigator** (PI).

The Principal Investigator (PI) is Bethany Alden (full time research student, A2070800)

The researcher's supervisors are Professor John Richardson (IET) and Dr. Maki Kimura (CHERI).

### **Published ethical guidelines to be followed**

For example: BERA, BPS, BSA (see Research Ethics web site for more information).

The ethical guidelines of the Open University and BERA will be followed.

### **Location(s) of data collection**

Give details of where and when data will be collected. If on private, corporate or institutional premises, indicate what approvals are gained/required.

Data will be collected through telephone interviews. This will take place toward

the end of April/beginning of May from the OU campus. The telephone recording equipment and room will be booked through IET.

### **Participants**

Give details of the population from which you will be sampling and how this sampling will be done.

I have gained SRPP approval to access a sample of 75 Openings students from the November 2008 cohort. The sample is comprised of:

25 completers from course Y156-08K

25 completers from course Y162-08K

25 completers from course Y163-08K

Approximately 5 informants from each course will be sought.

This is a random sample provided by IET and taken from the total population of Openings students on these three courses for this particular presentation (November 2008). The population only includes those completers that are available to take part in research.

### **Recruitment procedures**

How will you identify and approach potential participants?

Members of the sample will be contacted by post with a letter of introduction and a consent form. The letters will be sent out from the Centre for Widening Participation. I will make a follow-up telephone call to confirm whether or not the member of the sample will participate and to set up a date and time for the telephone interview.

### **Consent**

Give details of how informed consent will be gained and attach copies of information sheet(s) and consent form(s). Give details of how participants can withdraw consent and what will happen to their data in such a case (see the Research Ethics web site for an advisory document).

Members of the sample will receive a consent form (attached) with their initial letter of introduction. If they are willing to participate in the research, they will need to sign the form and return this to me (in the envelope provided) prior to the interview taking place.

At any time during the research the informants are free to withdraw and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from them, up to the point at which data are aggregated for analysis. (This is included in the consent form as well.)

## Methodology

Outline the method(s) that will be employed to collect and analyse data.

Data will be collected through recorded telephone interviews. These interviews will be transcribed and will be coded for analysis across the four themes (approach, awareness, engagement and added value).

## Data Protection

Give details of registration of the project under the DP Act and the procedures to be followed re: storage and disposal of data to comply with the Act. Please note OU guidance on the Research Ethics FAQ page - <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/strategy-unit/offices/ethics/faqs.shtml#p6>.

Data obtained during the study, in the form of audio files or transcripts or other personal data in electronic form, would be stored in password-protected files on a desktop PC in the researcher's office in the Open University. This office is routinely kept locked when not occupied by the researcher or one of the other students who uses the room in question.

Hard copies of any personal data obtained during the study (i.e. copies of original notes made in interviews) would be stored in lockable storage in the researcher's office.

It is proposed that data would be stored and potentially processed for up to 2/3 years after the submission of the PhD thesis that is intended to be the primary output of the research. This would allow for the possibility of the publishing of, for example, journal articles on aspects of the study. After this the data would be disposed of – electronic files would be deleted and hard copies of personal data would be destroyed (shredded or consigned to confidential waste).

## Recompense to participants

Normally, recompense is only given for expenses and inconvenience, otherwise it might be seen as coercion/inducement to participate. Give details of any recompense to participants.

It is not intended that participants would be recompensed.

## Deception

Give details of the withholding of any information from participants, or misrepresentation or other deception that is an integral part of the research. Any such deception should be fully justified.

Participants are aware of the aims of the research and the role they play in the project. No information about the research will be withheld (except of course the personal details of other participants). Misrepresentation and other forms of deception are not integral to this research.



## Risks

Detail any foreseen risks to participants or researchers and, based on a risk assessment, the steps that will be taken to minimise/counter these. If the proposed study involves contact with children or other vulnerable groups, please confirm that an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosure has been obtained for each person involved in these contacts.

No significant risks are foreseen. The participants will be located in their own environments (e.g. homes, offices, etc) since the data will be collected over the telephone.

## Debriefing

Give details of how information will be given to participants after data collection to inform them of the purpose of their participation and the research more broadly.

Participants are informed of the purpose for their participation prior to the interview.  
Summary information would also be made available to research participants on demand.  
The final research paper will be on file with the MRes office and with the OU Library. There may be opportunities for publication in journals as well.

## Declaration

Declare here that the research will conform to the above protocol and that any significant changes or new issues will be raised with the HPMEC before they are implemented.

A **Final Report** form will need to be filled in once the research has ended (you will be contacted by HPMEC on the date for final report below).

### Contact details

**Name** Bethany Alden

**Unit** CREET/IET

**Address** Rm 128, Crowther East

**Telephone** 07955 352 120

**E-mail** B.A.Alden@open.ac.uk

**Signature(s)** Bethany Alden

(this can be the typed name(s) of investigator(s) if electronic copy is submitted (which is preferred))

**Date** 8/04/09

**Proposed date for  
Final Report** 8/09/09

## **Appendix G: Data Protection Form**

### **DATA PROTECTION ACT 1998**

#### **Data Protection Questionnaire**

The Open University is registered with the UK Information Commissioner. We have provided a general description of the processing of personal data being carried out in the University and we must ensure that any new projects or uses of data are covered by our registration.

The purpose of this form is to inform the OU's Data Protection Coordinator about new projects or databases which use or record personal data.

If you are processing any personal data (whether on manual or electronic files not previously registered) please complete all sections of this form and return to the Data Protection Coordinator, Room 002, North Spur, Walton Hall and provide your Unit Data Protection Liaison Officer with a copy.

#### **Definitions**

Personal Data - Information relating to identifiable living individuals, including expressions of opinion.

Processing – Any action involving data, including obtaining, recording, analysing and destroying.

Data Subject – An individual about whom information is processed

The Data Protection Act requires that personal data be surrounded by appropriate security. Please refer to page 4 for advice.

#### **1. *About You***

Name: Bethany Alden

Staff No: A2070800

Job Title: Full Time Research Student

Area/Unit: CREET/IET

Phone No: 01908 332677 or 07955352120

Data Protection Liaison Officer: Nick Haycox

**2. Please provide us with a brief title of your project/database/data file**

**Project Title: Learners' perceptions of the reflective components of the Openings course model.**

**Database: Open University Openings students from the November 2008 (K) presentation to be interviewed to collect data regarding their perceptions of the reflective components of the Openings course model.**

**3. Processing Description**

(a) What do you use the data for?

**To contact recent Openings students for a telephone interview.**

(b) Is the data (tick as appropriate):

Manual ☐  
Electronic ☒

**4. About the Categories of Individual**

Tick one or more boxes identifying the categories of individuals to whom the data relate:

Students	<b>x</b>
Staff (including volunteers, agents, temporary and casual workers)	
Advisers, Consultants and other professional experts	
Authors, Publishers, Editors, Artists and other creators	
Third parties participating in course work (e.g. volunteers, survey respondents)	
Subjects of research	
Complainants	
Correspondents and enquirers	
Suppliers	
Customers and clients	
Financial sponsors	
Agents and contractors	
Previous and prospective employers of the data subject and other referees	
Donors and friends of the University	
Persons who may be the subject of enquiry/press release/promotional exercise	
Health professionals	
Welfare and pastoral professionals and advisers	
Business or other contacts	
Other - Please specify	

Other:

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**5. Data Subject Details**

Please provide more precise information about the individuals if possible, e.g. all students on the current presentation of T171

**Random sample of 25 students from each of the following courses  
(November 2008 presentation):**

**Y156, Y162 and Y163**

**6. About the Data**

Tell us what information you collect or hold about individuals e.g. PI, name, TMA scores etc.

**I will be holding their Name, PI number and contact details. I have also asked for some demographic data for the respondents (i.e. gender, age as of 1/4/09 and educational background).**

**7. About Recipients (to whom data are disclosed)**

	<b>Please tick</b>
Authorised employees and agents of the OU only	<b>x</b>
Other (please specify)	

**8. About any Transfers Overseas**

If personal data is transferred outside the European Economic Area (European Union member states plus Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland) please provide details of countries below:

n/a

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